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ABSTRACT

If the principles of feminism are to be enacted and nurtured in their development, then there must be an understanding of: (1) psychological, social, economic, legal, and cultural obstacles confronting women; and (2) assumption and expectations surrounding the feminist perspective. The classroom offers a unique context for developing these competencies, for it is a social system in which independence, humanness, and individual responsibility can be encouraged. Many educators and learning theorists offer approaches that lend themselves to developing a grammar of feminism. Of particular interest, however, are Neil Postman, Walker Percy, and Paulo Freire, for they offer a philosophical rationale that seems very conducive to establishing the kind of learning environment appropriate for the exploration of feminist issues. Fundamental to incorporating a process of questioning, helping students to embark on their own process of inquiry, and establishing a learning environment that enables students to respond to challenges so that they can develop a grammar of feminism, is a discovery of the ways in which women see and know, relate and respond. One way to help students discover seeing and knowing, relating and responding, is to assign speeches, essays, or small group discussions that address the question, "What does being a man/woman mean?" Other activities include reading and discussing essays such as Gloria Steinem's "Ruth's Song (Because She Could Not Sing It)" or viewing and discussing movies such as "Tootsie" or "The Way We Were." (PRA)

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FEMINISM AND LEARNING THEORIES:
A UNIQUE VOICE IN THE CLASSROOM

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FEMINISM AND LEARNING THEORIES: A UNIQUE VOICE IN THE CLASSROOM

We are only beginning to place women at the center of intellectual study. Such a focus contributes a female point of view long overlooked or neglected in traditional research. The scope of inquiry surrounding the study of feminism takes into account the diversity of female experience and explores a host of topics and issues related to an understanding of women's rightful place in society.

The theoretical basis of feminism rests on the belief that women and men alike have equal potential for individual development and growth. The reality, however, is that society, at least in part, is governed by male-defined, male-dominated social institutions and value systems that set parameters around women's attempts to realize their individuality. If the principles of feminism are to be enacted and nurtured in their development, then there must be an understanding of 1) psychological, social, economic, legal, and cultural obstacles confronting women, and 2) assumptions and expectations surrounding the feminist perspective. The roles and relationships of women in all aspects of life must be explored. The concept of personhood must be given meaning so that individuals can define themselves apart from each other, while realizing the similarities between the sexes. As Margaret Fuller suggested long ago: "The Woman in me kneels and weeps in tender rapture; the Man in me rushes forth, but only to be baffled. Yet the time will come when, from the union of this tragic king and queen, shall be born a radiant sovereign self."[1] Feminism is concerned with affording women this opportunity.

Carolyn Heilbrun argues that "womanhood must be reinvented,"[2] adding, "The materials for its reconstruction lie around us, some recovered or reinterpreted from the past, others revealed to us by students or our own time and place."[3] In essence, what is called for is a grammar of feminism that examines both the theoretical and practical aspects of the feminist perspective. This grammar would examine the assumptions, expectations, definitions, and metaphors of feminism, which would lead to the development of cognitive, linguistic, and communicative competence regarding the very essence of feminism. The classroom offers a unique context for developing these competencies, for it is a social system in which independence, humanness, and individual responsibility, all fundamental tenets of feminism, can be encouraged.

Many educators and learning theorists offer approaches that lend themselves to developing a grammar of feminism. Of particular interest, however, are Neil Postman, Walker Percy, and Paulo Freire, for they offer a philosophical rationale that seems very conducive to establishing the kind of learning environment appropriate for the exploration of feminist issues. First, in order to acquire an understanding of feminism, a process of questionning must occur, for as Postman argues, "all our knowledge results from questions, which is another way of saying that question-asking is our most important intellectual tool."[4] Postman would contend that to study feminism would involve entering "a particular language environment" in which students would have to learn the rules of discourse for feminism.[5] "As one learns the language of a subject," Postman suggests, "one is also learning what the subject is."[6] Consequently, Postman

explains that as students learn about the facts, assumptions, definitions, metaphors, and questions of a subject, they also learn "how to read, write, speak, and listen to the subject."[7]

In addition to the process of questionning and learning the language of a subject, a second consideration is critical when engaging in the study of feminism. Each individual student must embark on their own process of inquiry, finding their own answers, creating their own definitions and metaphors, separating themselves from the pre-packaged notions about women, which Walker Percy would term an act of seduction, or disinheritance.[8] For Percy, the highest role of the educator is "to help the student come to himself not as a consumer of experience but as a sovereign individual."[9] This goal seems particularly fitting given the philosophical basis of feminism.

Finally, a learning environment that enables students to respond to the challenges they are presented with is essential to developing a grammar of feminism. Students must be given freedom to be creative in their exploration of feminism, while also being given the proper motivation to explore in a critical manner. Paulo Freire suggests that there are two ways of approaching challenges in learning environments, only one of which is suitable to the kind of atmosphere of inquiry needed to examine feminism. Freire explains that the "banking concept of education" involves turning students into "containers" or "receptacles" that the teacher fills.[10] "Education," Freire argues, "becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor."[11] Consequently, Freire believes that the banking concept "serves the interests of oppression."[12] In light of this designation, such an

approach to studying feminism seems not only unwise, but contradictory to the very core of feminism. Problem-posing education involves students as "co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher,"[13] and by extension, with their peers. As Freire explains, "In problem-posing education, men develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation."[14] Problem-posing education claims that persons subject to domination must fight to emancipate themselves, for as Freire proclaims, echoing the sentiments of feminists, "No one can be authentically human while he prevents others from being so."[15] A problem-posing approach does not assume the questions and answers from the outset. It does not operate on a set of preconceived notions or myths. Instead, problem-posing education focuses on the study of humanity, relies upon individuals to engage in critical dialogue and inquiry, and regards discovery as a process of becoming rather than a permanent act. Problem-posing education offers us a structural framework in which to examine the feminist perspective in the classroom.

Fundamental to incorporating the three considerations just discussed is a discovery of the ways in which women see and know, relate and respond. Working from questions, assumptions, definitions, and metaphors within these components will provide students with a solid base of inquiry and exploration, a way to examine the specific language environment, or grammar, of feminism. It is important to note, though, that the components of seeing, knowing, relating, and responding are all intermeshed, which allows for multiple benefits

to be gained from the activities used to explore the feminist perspective. But these overlapping components should also illustrate the complexity of studying feminism, for each link in the chain affects, and is affected by the others.

A study of feminism invites us to explore ways that women can counter their feelings and experiences of disconnection, powerlessness, alienation, devaluation, and subjugation by confronting and replacing traditional notions of women's place and women's roles. The feminist perspective considers new ways of discovering and conceiving the self, which, in turn, forces a reevaluation of the ways in which women relate and respond to others. Given a problem-posing learning environment, emphasis on individual inquiry and discovery, and utilization of the process of questionning as the basis for learning the language of feminism, several activities are appropriate for use in the classroom.

Ways of Knowing and Seeing

Assign speeches, essays, or small group discussions that address the question, "What does being a woman/man mean?" As ideas/answers are presented, keep a list of the characteristics being offered. A discussion of the similarities and differences can then take place, which typically will serve to identify stereotypes, as well as illustrate that differences are not truly significant. A spinoff of this exercise is to have students roleplay the attitude set involved in each of the stereotypes in situations revolving around the family, workplace, etc. A second offshoot of this activity involves an open forum, a marketplace of ideas about what are typically labeled as "girl" things and what are labeled as "boy" things. Discussion can

focus on where we get our assumptions from, what metaphors are in operation, what definitions are used, for the purpose of discovering the language environment that such notions grow in.

Read and discuss the essay, "Ruth's Song (Because She Could Not Sing It)" by Gloria Steinem. Although the analysis of this essay involves a complexity of issues related in some deeply symbolic ways, the effort will be worthwhile. Steinem expresses a strong sentiment about a woman's search for understanding in this passage from the essay:

> I still don't understand why so many, many years passed before I saw my mother as a person and before I understood that many of the forces in her life are patterns women share. Like a lot of daughters, I suppose I couldn't afford to admit that what had happened to my mother was not all personal or accidental, and therefore could happen to me.[16]

A discussion of the forces affecting Steinem's mother can lead to a discovery of assumptions, constraints, and concerns that impinge upon women's lives and choices.

Show the movie, "Tootsie" for students. An open discussion of the various issues raised in the movie would certainly be fruitful. But of particular importance would be a discussion of what Dustin Hoffman means when he remarks that he makes a better man as a woman than he ever did as a man. There is so much ground for discovery embedded in this statement. Consider also what evidence there was in Hoffman's character of Tootsie that led him to this conclusion. Make students dig for the implications.

Read and discuss Elizabeth Cady Stanton's essay/speech, "The Solitude of Self."[17] First, however, have students write a poem or song lyrics that reflect what it means to be a person. Then have them read the essay by Stanton. Instead of using a discussion format,

a debate in which opposing positions on what it means to be a person could be enacted. With the proper kind of guidance, students can really engage in a critical dialogue concerning assumptions, definitions, and metaphors that underscore the way students conceive of personhood or the concept of self. After the debate/discussion, have the students prepare another poem or song about what it means to be a person, or perhaps simply revise their first one. It is interesting to see if any significant changes really occur between the first and the second attempt.

Ways of Relating and Responding

Read and discuss the short story, "A Visit from the Footbinder",[18] by Emily Prager. The thrust of this story is found in a mother's sense of powerlessness to encourage her daughter to break away from the constraints of tradition and society's expectations, even though her inner voice taunts her to do so. This story goes far beyond superficial mother-daughter issues, for it really addresses the complexities confronting women as they meet challenges and make decisions. The mother undergoes a painful self-questionning process as she and her daughter face more doubts and uncertainties than comforting answers. The challenge of tradition provides much opportunity for the students to explore the implications of this enormous undertaking. Have students identify the ways in which mother and daughter respond and relate to each other, and also the ways in which they respond to the challenge with which they are faced.

Have students view either of the movies, "The Way We Were", or "Everybody's All-American." Both of these movies center around the changes in female and male roles over a long period of time and so-

cietal, as well as, personal forces that directly affect their responses. Through discussion and/or essays, students can start to sift through the surface level material and head towards an examination of what the main characters say about themselves, about each other, and how they relate with and to each other. Variables such as language, nonverbal characteristics and actions, power, status, roles, and how conflict is handled can be examined. Of particular interest will be to see how well students observe and identify the significant changes in these variables over the course of years that is developed in the movies. There is much potential for critical thinking and critical dialogue to occur in this examination.

All of these activities offer opportunities to examine feminist concerns and principles in a learning environment that promotes individual discovery and analysis. It is through these activities that a grammar of feminism can begin to take shape. Ultimately, students should be able to demonstrate their growth toward cognitive, linguistic, and communicative competence regarding what it means to be a person, how to discover and conceive of the self, and ways to help overcome the sense of, and often the reality of, a loss of sovereignty.

This paper has established a philosophical context in which to view feminism, an educational perspective that suggests a unique framework in which to study feminism, and pedagogical techniques and resources that can be implemented to help students in their journey toward discovering and defining the self and all that entails.

ENDNOTES

[1]Bell Gale Chevigny, The Woman and the Myth: Margaret Fuller's Life and Writings (Old Westbury, N.Y.: The Feminist Press, 1976), 216.

[2]Carolyn G. Heilbrun, Reinventing Womanhood (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1979), 35.

[3]Ibid.

[4]Neil Postman, Teaching As A Conserving Activity (New York: Delacorte Press, 1979), 154.

[5]Ibid., 155.

[6]Ibid., 165.

[7]Ibid., 163.

[8]Walker Percy, "The Loss of the Creature," in Ways of Reading: An Anthology for Writers, David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987), 407.

[9]Ibid.

[10]Paulo Freire, "The Banking Concept of Education," in Bartholomae and Petrosky, 238.

[11]Ibid., 239.

[12]Ibid., 243. Also see 240-244.

[13]Ibid., 245.

[14]Ibid., 249.

[15]Ibid.

[16]Gloria Steinem, "Ruth's Song (Because She Could Not Sing It)", in Bartholomae and Petrosky, 485.

[17]Stanton's speech was delivered to the twenty-fourth annual meeting of the National-American Woman Suffrage Association, held in Washington, D.C., January 18, 1892. It has been reprinted in numerous anthologies.

[18]Emily Prager, "A Visit from the Footbinder," in Close Company: Stories of Mothers and Daughters, eds. Christine Park and Caroline Heaton (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1989), 48-76.